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ABSTRACT

The teaching of poetry can be used as a language experience approach to develop good writing skills in elementary and high school students. This paper discusses the techniques a "poet-in-residence" employed to help students create poems and, indirectly, to teach the function of such writing skills as parts of speech, punctuation, and correct word usage. Examples of student poems are included. (RL)

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POETRY AS PART AND PARCEL OF YOUR BASIC LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE

Ellen Turlington Johnston

Creating, recreating experience with words, using words in unique, surprising combinations to create new experience - that's what a poet does.

Taking the old; i.e., love, spring, loneliness, beauty, joy, despair and, by selecting one specific situation or thing, revealing a universal truth - that's what a poet does.

Shocking readers out of their complacency into new, exciting awareness by playing with words, finding the best ones, using them in the best order; making concrete, vivid word-pictures, compressing, shaping, reshaping until the words make something happen - that's what a poet does.

What could be more basic, more vital in our teaching of language than to get young people hooked on the power of words? Through the writing of poetry, they can discover the magic that happens when they discover word combinations which make the invisible visible, which share the way they are, the way they feel and think and experience.

Poems happen; they are in everyone, everywhere. I did not know that in my "Poetry-in-the-Schools" visits to kindergarten through twelfth grade classes, I was using the "Language Experience Approach." A professor of reading in the Education Department at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, after I visited one of his classes, demonstrating how I "do my thing," told me I <u>am</u> using it. I had not heard the term before; I did not know that it is the "now" thing to do. It simply seems natural, (basic, if you will), to overcome student insecurity, resistence to

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writing poetry by starting in with group poems about things they are involved in, care about. We write about recess, the sliding board, a study hall, Farah Fawcett, cold crickets dying in the science lab , a frisbee, doing math, dressing for the prom, cutting class, "Swish," (the weekly flouride mouthwash ritual at an elementary school), having your lunch money ripped off, a ball game on a rainy Friday night, cutting class, rigging lockers, the class gerbil.

"Share yourselves, your world with me," I urge. "Each one of you is unique, special. And your school, like others in many ways, is unique and special, too. Don't just <u>tell</u> me it's fun or exciting or a drag; through one special time, event, place, SHOW me, put me there, make me live it with you.

"Don't just tell me your study hall is noisy; let me hear it through your words. What do people say? What do they <u>do</u>?"The following is an exerpt from a high school group poem:

"...and we knock each other around,
and wait for lunch,
and dream about the prom,
and chew Doublemint,
and sing like Elvis,
and we sit back,
wonder what life is...
and say,
'Sit down, Beady!'...
and - sometimes -
we even
study! "

Here is an exerpt from another study hall poem from another school:

"...Anthony thumps a football across the room.
Ray catches it.
Mrs. Jacobs takes it.
That's the end of the football.
Anthony gets a pink slip.
Baldwin throws a spitball.
It goes SPLAT! on Mike's head.
Mike slaps him.
And then...
And then...
And then....
the bell rings.
We flee to the bus!

Great poetry? No. But it's a beginning. The students had fun writing these; they laughed; they "got into it." They had made something happen, and they knew it. Best of all, they wanted to write more!

"Do you see what action words can do for your writing?" I ask. Use verbs. They are your best friends. If you want someone else to experience what you feel, adjectives will not cut it. What do you do when you are sad, happy, angry?" We brainstorm, listing all the verbs we can think of for sad: How do you move?..."drag, droop, creep, slouch." What about when you are happy?..."skip, hop, scamper, amble."

"Don't tell me you are mad; SHOW me!" Here is part of a group poem by a second grade class:

WHEN I'M MAD....

I cry,
 lie on my bed,
 punch my fat pillow.
I frown,
 squinch my eyes,
 pucker my mouth.
I shout, 'MOVE!,'
 tell Todd and Spooky,
 'If you don't move,
 I'm gonna kick you!'
  .....
 I lock myself
  in my room,
  the linen closet,
  the bathroom.
 I hit
  my sister's arm,
  Edwin,
  a tire pump.
 And I run away from home
  for 1,000 years,
  or 2 weeks,
  or 1 hour.

Great poetry? No, again. But the beginning of discovery of how to use language to share feelings, experiences. The beginning of excitement with words!

I offer another example, this one an individual poem by a senior high student who had not written poetry before. We knew there was a poem in those cold crickets. We brainstormed for verbs. "It's yours now; play with these words we've found, mix and match, juxtapose; make them work for you!" I coached. He did!

COLD CRICKETS

Shivering
Shaking
Running out
Eyeballs moving all about
Legs trembling
Bodies jerking
Hundred huddled in masses
Cold
Cold
Cold
Cold
Creeping crickets crawl no more.

The young man did not include the information that it was the too-cold air-conditioner that caused the untimely death of the crickets in the lab. He was exercising his right as an artist to select, emphasize only those details which would create the experience he set out to create. He had learned something important.

A fourth grade group relived a swim in the ocean:

SWIMMING

Swimming
Hot sand
burns
sinks
soft...smooth
I zip
to biting waves
popcorn dancing
splashing
jumping
leaping
burning eyes
tossing
spinning
reeling waves
tug
me
back

Experience through language - - - poetry.

What about punctuation? When collaborating on a poem, talk it over: do you want a period here? a comma? nothing? Try it out, see what works. What a natural way to teach the function of commas, semi-colons, dashes, all of them.

Poetry for teaching parts of speech? Yes!

Take a picture, one with some action in it; tell your students you are going to work on making that picture happen for someone who will never see it. Here is how I do it with a large picture of three elephants, ears flapping, eyes blazing, charging head on. We draw five columns on the board; adjectives, nouns, verbs, adverbs, five star verbs. We fill up each column, brainstorming. We list colors, gray, brown, green in the first column. Also, big, huge, angry, other descriptive words. When we come to the nouns, we list the obvious; i.e., ears, trunks, tusks, etc. "But let's suppose you're telling your kid sister about this picture; let's suppose she never saw an elephant. How can you make her see these ears?" They look like....and it begins. Metaphors, similes pour from all sides. "Giant palm leaves, tents, giant shells..." Looking at one thing, seeing another. Figurative language. The poet's art. Verbs come next. "What are they doing - these elephants? Running? O.K. Fast? One for the adverb column. Angrily? Another adverb. "Now, find me some five star verbs; combine the adverb with the verb. Compress. Incorporate for ~~one~~ hard-hitting, powerful verbs."

This is where we pull out the stops. Together, we list words like rampage, stampede, trample, trumpet, smash, and so on. We find words that make us see and hear and feel the elephant charge.

"You're on your own now," I charge my students. Mix, match, play with these words, cut out everything that doesn't pack a wallop. You won't need prepositions and articles and conjunctions here; they'll

slow up the stampede, diminish the rage you are recreating with your words. Go to it!"

Here is a result of our exercise:

ELEPHANTS

Through the jungle they rage,
stalk, stampede,
charge ,
giant palm tree ears
flopping in the wind;
black tornado trunks
curl like ugly worms.
Ivory machettes shine,
flash,
slash,
stabbing,
tearing.
Here they come!
Here they come!

REVISION: SHOW IT, don't tell it.

When you are working on a group poem, the students will let you know what words need to be crossed out, re-positioned, repeated, what lines should be shortened for a stronger effect. You reshape, revise together. They watch you crossing out, adding here, taking away there, tightening, building new words-combinations. You share the writing experience together. They see that revision is the name of the game. They feel the excitement as you build the experience, make something happen. It works!

"WE DON'T DO NOTHIN' IN HERE!"

"Back to the basics," irrate parents shout, "back to grammar drills and more drills!"

We who believe in the power of poetry to turn on our students to language; we who believe, who know now, that grammar drills alone will not make better writers, readers, communicators of the young, have our work cut out for us. The following is the poem I wrote from experiences in my creative writing class, an elective English course I taught at North Mecklenburg High School, Charlotte, N.C.

"WE DON'T DO NOTHIN' IN HERE!"

Today
a small sparrow
perched on a slanted window pane,
peeking, upside down, into my classroom.
Before I'd even seen the little eavesdropper,
three students shouted,
"HEY!
There's a POEM, Miz. J.!"

Sure enough, it <u>was</u> -
a real class-stopper.
They wrote in their "Polaroids,"
(the little note pads
they take word-pictures in),
of freedom,
and boredom,
and upside-down,
and flight.
The poems sprouted
left and right.
About then, this voice piped up, loud and clear:
"I signed up for <u>English</u>.
When're we gonna do some ENGLISH in here?!?"

Today
we skipped backwards
to when we were very young,
and see-sawed,
and Blind-Man-Bluffed at twilight,
and sang out OLLEY-OLLEY-OXEN-ALL-IN-FREE.
And I told them how
the principle happiness for me
when I was six,
was my l'il Orphan Annie decoder pin.
Then, they remembered again
the wonder of home-made mud pies,
and magic wands that used to be sticks.
We wrote of tadpole pets
that - O! happy surprise -
turned to frogs overnight;
and of floppity, red-headed Raggedy Anns,
and three-wheelers,
and first patent-leather shoes,
spittin' bright.
Children again, we spun our wonderment
into shimmering nets of words, there.
Again, the voice: "This is 'sposed to be <u>English</u>.
So when're we gonna ever do some ENGLISH in here?!?"

Today
we hobbled ahead
to very, very old.
We wrote of grandmothers,
great-uncles,
arthritis,
of tales told, told, and retold.

and of the musty smell of old,
and the thin-ness.
"His baggy trouses lapped around his ankles,"
Mary wrote.
When she read it to us, I got goose-bumply cold.
(So did quite a few others.)
We wrote about lonely....
"The eyes, outlets of many visions,
how tired and forgotten."

We wove words into tapestries of bony fingers,
trembling hands with brown spots,
lavendar shawls.

Today
we played with words.
We found sixty-eight - count 'em - in all,
to use for "said,"
to show how someone feels;
like: they shout or exclaim or whimper or groan.
Words flew like confetti in there.
Then...the voice again...demanding:
"But when're we gonna have some English?"

"English?"

"Yeah. Nouns and adjectives.
Disgraming.
ENGLISH!
We don't do NOTHIN! in here!" [1]

Yes, we have our work cut out for us. We must convince skeptical parents, doubting kids, who think they're not doing anything if they're not diagramming a sentence, picking out prepositions and direct objects, that learning to play with words, create experience with language, release the poets within themselves, is basic, and exciting, and - in the vernacular - very much "where it's at!"

[1] From "WE DON'T DO NOTHIN' IN HERE!" - Moore Publishing Company, 1976
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